

The Classroom: Exploring its Effects on Student Persistence and Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

The academic persistence of students in higher education continues to be a critical issue among academicians. Emphasized in previous studies is the recognition that intuitional variables do influence student's decisions to persist in attaining their educational goals. However, little or no past research exists on the effects of the higher education classroom on student persistence and satisfaction. For this reason it seemed feasible to identify institutional variables cited in relevant literature as being primary determinants of the student departure process. The purpose of this article is to explore the higher education classroom and its effects on student persistence and satisfaction.

Introduction

The classroom is the central point of the higher educational structure; the social and academic integration which occurs therein is a major feature of the learning experience. According to Vincent Tinto (1993), for students who commute to college, especially those who have multiple obligations outside the college, the classroom may be the only place where students and faculty meet, where education in the formal sense is experienced. For those students, in particular, the classroom is the crossroad where the social integration and academic integration convene. If this integration is to occur, it must occur in the classroom.

There are numerous studies focusing on student persistence and the manner in which it influences student retention on traditional university campuses; however, the classroom has not played a more central role in current theories of student persistence (Bean, 1983; Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Forest, 1982; Tinto, 1987). It is evident that the classroom setting is important, especially as it may shape academic integration and social integration. There is little or no past research exploring how these experiences shape student persistence and satisfaction.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to explore the higher education classroom and its effects on student persistence and satisfaction. In order to face the challenges of student retention, the classroom must be explored to determine how these experiences affect the student attrition process. The classroom is a part of the curricular structure that links different disciplines around a common theme.

Understanding the elements of the classroom experience will provide students, faculty, staff, and administrators with a vital sense of shared inquiry. The classroom experience must be designed to provide positive experiences through the adoption of various learning strategies. The article seeks to ascertain to what degree the classroom experience enhances student learning and persistence and, if so, how it does so.

Beyond its obvious policy implications, the article purports to provide the context for a series of reflections on the ways in which current theories of student persistence might be modified to account more directly for the role of classroom experience in the process of both student learning and persistence. The article identifies variables associated with student integration or lack thereof, into the educational environment and whether or not these variables have an effect on student persistence. Lastly, the article purports to provide the aspects of student satisfaction and student perceptions of their learning experiences.

The Problem

As a result of low retention rates, administrators are seeking strategies to create a positive atmosphere that is supportive in meeting student needs in order to ensure student persistence. There is a critical linkage that exists between student involvement in classrooms, student learning, and student persistence. Research studies have identified factors that contribute to and influence student decisions to persist, or leave college before accomplishing their intended educational goals (Astin, 1987, 1993; Bean, 1983; Braxton, 1995, Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993).

In particular, Tinto's attrition model (1975, 1987, & 1993) is among those strategies that have been used in an attempt to describe and categorize the student attrition process. Although persistence in college is important, students' overall satisfaction with their educational experiences and their interactions on the college campus are the most important factors (Tinto, 1993). Collectively, the educational environment and organizational culture is important in determining student satisfaction and their motivation to persist.

Statement of the Problem

Research studies in the past have analyzed student retention, particularly among traditional university student populations (Anderson, 2001; Astin, 1993; Braxton, 2000; Cope & Hannah, 1975; NCES, 1997, 1998, 1999; Noel et. al., 1985; Tinto, 1975, 1987, & 1993). As McLeod and Young (2005) have proposed, it is necessary to investigate the factors that influence a student's decision to remain or not to remain enrolled at a minority institution. The most important factor in predicting a student's eventual departure from college is absence of sufficient contact with others (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). Ostrow, Paul, Dark, and Berhman (1986) found that supportive relationships enable students to better cope with the demands of the college environment.

Few studies exist which focus on the higher education classroom and the manner in which it can effects student persistence and satisfaction of students enrolled on traditional university campuses. Evident in previous studies is the recognition that institutional variables do influence a student's decision to persist in attaining their educational goals.

The Classroom Environment's Effect on Student Persistence

There is a critical linkage that exists between student involvement in classrooms, student learning, and student persistence. The classroom plays an important role in the

student learning and persistence process. According to McKeachie (1970, 1994) and Smith (1980, 1983), it is evident that multiple relationships exist between teacher behaviors and student participation in classroom discussions and learning. Student participation in the higher education classroom is relatively passive (Smith, 1983; Karp & Yoels, 1976; Nunn, 1996), and lecturing is dominant (Fischer & Grant, 1983). The author Nunn (1996) found that classroom traits, specifically a supportive atmosphere, are as important to student participation as are student and faculty traits. The recognition of the importance of classroom environment is part of another area of inquiry, namely the role of classroom context, its educational activities and normative orientations, in student learning. Instead of focusing on the behaviors of faculty, a number of researchers have focused on the role of pedagogy (Karplus, 1974; Lawson & Snitgen, 1982; McMillan, 1987) and, in turn, curriculum (Dressel & Mayhew, 1954; Forrest, 1982) and classroom activities (Volkwein, King, & Terenzini, 1986) as predictors of student learning. Generally speaking, these have led to a growing recognition that student learning is enhanced when students are actively involved in learning and when they are placed in situations in which they have to share learning in some positive, connected manner (Astin, 1987).

Student Involvement in the Classroom

As numerous researchers have suggested (Astin, 1984; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Nora, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977), the greater students are academically integrated in the life of the institution, the greater the likelihood that they will persist. Students who feel they do not fit academically in the environment of the institution possess lower levels of satisfaction than those who feel they belong (Bean & Bradley, 1986; Pervin & Rubin, 1967). Astin (1993), Friedlander (1980), Parker and Schmidt (1982), Ory and Braskamp (1988), and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), all suggested that student involvement in the classroom influences learning.

When students are actively involved in the life of the college, especially academically, they will possess greater acquisitions of knowledge and skill development. Juillerat (1995) determined students who participate actively in their learning experience possess higher satisfaction rates than less involved students. According to Endo and Harpel (1982) and Astin (1993) student and faculty engagement, both inside and outside the classroom, are important to the student development process. Endo and Harpel (1982) suggested further those students who persisted which were reported to have had higher levels of contact with peers and faculty and also demonstrated higher levels of learning gain over the course of their stay in college. High levels of involvement prove to be an independent predictor of learning. The more time students invest in their own learning, the higher their level of effort, the more students learn.

Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) wrote that research studies left social integration unexplained. Institutional type (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983), organizational attributes (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton & Brier, 1989), motivations for attending

college (Stage, 1989), financial aid (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992), fulfillment of expectations for college (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995), sense of community in residence halls (Berger, 1997), student involvement (Milem & Berger, 1997), life task predominance (Brower, 1992), and self-efficacy (Peterson, 1993) are among the concepts given to understand both academic and social integration and their effects on student departure decisions. Various constructs may also be derived from the role of the institutional classroom in the student departure process and the identification of forces that influence academic integration and social integration. Tinto (1997) suggested that if social integration was to occur, it must occur in the classroom, because the classroom functioned as a gateway for student involvement in the academic and social communities of a college. Thus, the college classroom constitutes one possible source of influence on academic and social integration.

Student Satisfaction and Perceptions of the Classroom Experience

The authors, Bean and Bradley suggest student satisfaction is defined as “a pleasurable emotional state resulting from a person’s enactment of the role of being a student” (1986, p. 398). Overall life realization includes fulfillment with specific domains, such as student satisfaction (Coffman & Gilligan, 2000). Therefore, it is assumed that a students’ overall satisfaction with the learning experience is an indicator of college persistence. In addition, Coffman and Gilligan (2000) further found that those students who withdraw from college prior to graduation are less likely to be able to identify someone on campus with whom they had developed a significant relationship. These students report low satisfaction with their personal interactions, social isolation, and absence of opportunities for academic contact. Most of these students report academic difficulties which occur in the classroom highly influenced their departure from college.

According to Juillerat (1995), a student related variable that has been found to be connected to student satisfaction is institutional fit. The more acquainted a student is with the environment of the institution, the more he/she will fit into the culture of the institution. Students who feel as if they do not fit into the culture of the institution possess lower levels of satisfaction than those who feel that they belong.

According to Juillerat (1995), student satisfaction is the extent to which a students’ perceived educational experience meets or exceeds his/her expectations. Student satisfaction can be defined by the positive and negative gaps in the expectation level and perceived reality. If a students’ expectation is matching or exceeds his/her evaluation of reality then seemingly the student is satisfied. On the other hand, if a students’ expectation is higher than his/her evaluation of reality then seemingly the student is dissatisfied. This approach to defining student satisfaction assists institutions in determining satisfaction levels and closes the gap between reality and expectations.

Bean and Bradley (1986) determined that the number of friends a student has, along with his/her confidence in his/her social life, has a significant effect on satisfaction

levels. Weir and Okun (1989) found similar results in the amount of contact a student has with peers, faculty, staff and administrators was positively correlated with academic satisfaction. The availability and formal and informal interaction with faculty, staff and administrators for interaction with students is related to student satisfaction and persistence. Endo and Harpel (1982) further suggest that a student expectation for peer involvement academically is a contributor to student satisfaction and persistence.

Another important factor of a students' overall satisfaction with the learning experience is their perceptions of their academic programs of study. The authors Bean and Bradley (1986) suggest if a student is academically integrated and interested in their course of study, motivated to study, and likes the faculty teaching the course will possess high satisfaction. Juillerat (1995) suggests, stimulating coursework and high teaching ability of professors is related to academic satisfaction.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this article is to explore the higher education classroom and its effects on student persistence and satisfaction. In order to face the challenges of student retention, the classroom must be explored to determine how these experiences affect the student attrition process. The classroom is a part of the curricular structure that links different disciplines around a common theme.

Understanding the elements of the learning experience will provide students, faculty, staff, and administrators with a vital sense of shared inquiry. The classroom experience must be designed to provide positive experiences through the adoption of collaborative learning strategies. The article seeks to ascertain to what degree such strategies enhance student learning and persistence and, if so, how they do so.

In conclusion, administrators in higher education should embrace an understanding of strategies for minority student retention. Administrators have continuously overlooked the essentially educational and developmental character of persistence as it occurs in most institutional settings. There is a rich line of inquiry of the linkage between learning and persistence that has yet to be pursued. Administrators must continue to fully explore the complex ways in which the experiences in the classroom shape both student learning and persistence. The author Braxton (1995) questioned the role of faculty teaching in student satisfaction and persistence. Administrators must be equipped to face the challenges of minority student retention and be proactive in their approaches retain minority students. A students' ability to be connected to the institutional environment and their ability to adapt to the organizational culture are related to vocational and educational stability, student satisfaction, and student success. The institutional environment and the organizational culture mediate student academic and social experiences in college. Educational stability, student satisfaction, and student success are the building blocks of the retention process.

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